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Beating Cervical Cancer: Kristen's Story

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By Kristen Brindley

I am a 31 years old dependent wife, married and in a monogamous relationship for over five years. In the past, I was never promiscuous, never smoked, only drank alcohol occasionally and was a picture of health. I ate red meat sparingly, was a fresh fruit and vegetable fan, ran almost every day, and completed a marathon last year. The summer of 2013 I felt the best I had ever felt.

It all happened in less than a month. An unexpected emergency room visit because of excessive bleeding, led to a two day overnight stay at the hospital with four blood transfusions and six examinations to include a biopsy of my cervix. After the first night the "[Cervical Cancer](#)" word started to pop out of the doctor's mouth. Random words that included tumor, radical hysterectomy, no chance for children ... The doctors kept asking me about my Pap smear history. I know I had gone without a Pap smear for over six years, but I had never thought I needed one. Pap smears invaded your privacy, were a nuisance and I was taught that sexually promiscuous people that smoked and had poor life choices were more at risk.

I was discharged from the hospital after two days. It would take four to seven days to get the results of the biopsy back. After my third day sitting at home, the doctor called and left a message to come in and be seen in the morning at the clinic. I called back immediately, and had him tell me on the phone ... I just remember crying as the words "Cervical cancer" and "Squamous cell carcinoma," were said.

The next morning I was back in the clinic with the doctors repeating my results. The scary words were getting worse. It all hit me at once, surgery, radiation and chemotherapy. I was

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February 2015 (7)

January 2015 (12)

December 2014 (17)

November 2014 (11)

consulted to gynecology oncology that morning and the oncologist was able to see me right away. I was scheduled for a PET scan later that week. The PET scan would tell me if the cancer had spread to other parts of my body and if more evasive action would need to be taken.

Waiting on the PET scan results was one of the scariest days of my life. Results came back showing that there was a 5cm tumor on my cervix, which had not spread into my uterus or surround tissue. There were two pelvic lymphnodes that were slightly questionable, but my treatment plan included radiation that would take care of them. This was actually good news. I was diagnosed with stage IB2 cervical cancer and laparoscopic surgery to biopsy lymphnodes was scheduled the following week and chemotherapy and radiation would start four days after.

The tumor had caused the bleeding. If I had not had any bleeding, I would not have even known that I had a tumor. That's the "funny" part about cervical cancer. It is a sneaky progressive disease that without scheduled pap smears; can hit you out of the blue.

What have I learned from this? I will touch on two main points. (1) Pap Smears are important for every woman regardless of sexual activity or sexual orientation. You need to get your scheduled pap smears and the HPV vaccine. This is not a genetic disease; if cervical tissue changes are caught early then cancer is 100 percent preventable. (2) Cancer is not just about YOU. It affects everyone around you.



My wife is on Active Duty and was seven months pregnant with our baby girl when we first found out the news. She is the first thing I think about when I talk about how hard this has been. She has had held her breath with me while waiting on results, sat in the waiting room on my surgery days, helped me shower, helped me dress, fed me, took on additional chores and carted me around to every appointment. She has been the strongest person I know through all of this. I have family and friends that are there to help as well, but my wife was the most positive force in my life. I don't know how she managed her work, carrying the baby, and also dealing with the worry of cancer. My biggest guilt has been the burden and worry I put on her, my family and friends. Every day I think about how I can pay her back for all of this.

I had a total of two major surgeries as well as radiation appointments every day for six weeks, to include Saturdays and sometimes Sundays. Some days I could drive, other days when I'm a little too tired my wife had to drive me. Chemotherapy was once a week for seven treatments and took up most of the entire day. The chemotherapy also could cause hearing loss so I had to schedule weekly hearing exams. Every Friday I had to have my blood work done to ensure my bone marrow was not failing. There were some hectic times as I was admitted to the hospital a second time for excessive bleeding that required more blood transfusions. So far six different people have provided blood that has saved my life.

Once the external radiation treatments were almost over, I had to have internal radiation treatments once a week. Those required anesthesia to put me in a twilight sleep for part of the procedure. It was very uncomfortable and took up most the entire day. My side effects from all of this included nausea, bowel problems and weakness. Most days I felt like a train ran over me, and I had never felt so weak. When you hear that chemotherapy and radiation wear you out, they are not joking!

October 2014 (15)

September 2014 (20)

August 2014 (14)

July 2014 (13)

June 2014 (8)

May 2014 (11)

April 2014 (9)

March 2014 (14)

February 2014 (7)

January 2014 (7)

December 2013 (7)

November 2013 (12)

October 2013 (7)

September 2013 (14)

August 2013 (13)

July 2013 (11)

June 2013 (22)

May 2013 (15)

April 2013 (14)

March 2013 (14)

February 2013 (14)

January 2013 (12)

December 2012 (11)

November 2012 (11)

October 2012 (7)

September 2012 (9)

August 2012 (12)

July 2012 (13)

June 2012 (17)

May 2012 (22)

April 2012 (14)

March 2012 (13)

February 2012 (14)

January 2012 (13)

December 2011 (13)

November 2011 (20)

October 2011 (22)

September 2011 (12)

August 2011 (16)

I had to learn everything I could about the short term and long term side effects of chemotherapy and radiation and once treatments are over. So far I seem to have only a few residual side effects. The biggest side effect right now is early onset menopause that has eliminated the possibility of being able to carry a child. I will also continue to have scarring inside from the internal treatments for the rest of my life. I have five years of follow up exams ranging from every three, six and 12 months before I can be termed "cancer free." One thing about all of this, I have maintained a positive attitude and the best news is that we are BEATING this disease. I have completed my treatments and the tumor is gone. I recently had a biopsy that showed no residual cancer and in two months I will have another PET Scan to see if the cancer has spread. The light at the end of the tunnel seems to be getting brighter every day.

July 2011 (10)

At the end of all of this my wife and I welcomed our baby girl into the world in November. She is beautiful and I know she is going to be a handful! Every day I am thankful that I get to hold her in my arms and our daily routines include feeding, burping, playing and changing diapers and not daily hospital visits or treatments.

I have battle scars internally and externally, but they have made me stronger and a better person. My advice to you is DO NOT put off your pelvic exams; take care of yourself so you can continue to take care of those around you. Cervical cancer is real and PREVENTABLE. Take steps now, talk to your health care provider about setting up an appointment. Getting seen is never too late.

January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month. To find out more information about cervical cancer visit the National Cancer Institute's [website](#).

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